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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the career counseling process, specifically on the contribution of assessment procedures to career exploration and planning. Because these career development tasks are experienced by everyone, this digest addresses assessment for the many rather than intensive, problem focused career counseling. The following basic considerations are examined: (1) Trait and Factor Theory: The Foundation for Assessment; (2) Self-Concept: The Basis for Career Choice; (3) Assessment: A Primary Means for Self/Career Exploration; (4) Transformation of Assessment Data: Requirement of Helpful Assessment; (5) Data-Information Transformation: Bridge to Reality; (6) Informed Self-Estimates: Key to Ability Assessment; (7) Comprehensive, Articulated Assessment: A Goal; and (8) Development of Possibilities into Realities: A Requirement. Trait and factor theory has been revitalized by career development theory. Recognition of the importance of the self-concept in career exploration provides the basis for a closer relationship between assessment and counseling. (JBj)

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Assessment in Career Counseling

by Dale J. Prediger

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Assessment in Career Counseling

Dale J. Prediger

Overview

"In choosing an occupation one is, in effect, choosing a means of implementing a self-concept" (Super, 1957, p. 196). What might be called "Super's Dictum" has an antecedent in ancient Greek thought: "Know Thyself." It was formulated in the early days of the career development revolution that eventually swept away square-peg-square-hole thinking about assessment. Current thinking regarding the role of assessment in career development and counseling represents an extension of Super's Dictum and a revitalization of trait and factor theory.

Since the content of assessment in career counseling (e.g., interests, abilities, career certainty) is well-covered by other digests in this series (also see Kapes, Mastie, & Whitfield, in press), this digest focuses on the process—specifically, the contribution of assessment procedures to career exploration and planning. (Super's Dictum on choosing an "occupation" encompasses the *total occupational choices* characterizing exploration and planning.) Because these career development tasks are experienced by everyone, this digest addresses assessment for the many (e.g., via career planning courses) rather than intensive, problem-focused career counseling.

Basic Considerations

1. Trait and Factor Theory: The Foundation for Assessment

Assessment procedures used in career counseling have their roots in tests used for diagnostic screening and personnel selection (hiring). As a result, the "test 'em and tell 'em" approach to test use and the focus of scores on arbitrary decision points (e.g., helping Pat choose a career at 10:20 a.m. on Tuesday, March 17th) were major problems at one time. Trait and factor theory was and continues to be blamed for these problems. However, there is nothing inherently wrong with assessing human traits. Indeed, assessment is part of human nature; for millennia, we have "sized-up" strangers and acquaintances. Misinterpretations and misapplications of trait and factor theory are now widely recognized and there have been several recent attempts to place trait assessment into the context of career development theory (e.g., see Chartrand, 1991; Rounds & Tracey, 1990).

2. Self-Concept: The Basis for Career Choice

According to Super's Dictum, an occupation gives one the chance to be the kind of person one wants to be; hence, career choices are based on self-concepts projected into career options. It follows that a major task in career counseling is to elicit and inform self-concepts—not a simple process (Betz, 1994) unless one prioritizes components according to career relevance. Faulty self-concepts are likely to result in flawed plans and choices. Herr and Cramer (1992) said it this way: "The major concern in a career [development] model is the clarity and accuracy of the

self-concept as the evaluative base by which to judge available career options" (p. 155).

3. Assessment: A Primary Means for Self/Career Exploration

Given today's complex array of career options, one of the most difficult developmental tasks persons face is the identification and exploration of options congruent with their characteristics. Assessment can provide focus to career exploration. In the process of assessment and career exploration, counselees will develop insights about themselves and the work world that will inform their self-concepts. In a nutshell, the major role of assessment in career counseling is *self/career exploration*—a complementary process.

4. Transformation of Assessment Data: Requirement of Helpful Assessment

Assessment data (standard scores, percentile ranks, etc.) must go through a series of transformations if they are to be helpful in career counseling. First, data must be transformed into counseling information—i.e., career options worthy of exploration. Next, a short list of options must be transformed into action—i.e., self-evaluated activities and experiences. Finally, self-evaluations and self-concepts must be transformed into career plans. Because of the research and technology involved (see below), counselors should require that test publishers take primary responsibility for the first transformation. Counselors and counselees share responsibility for the other two.

5. Data-Information Transformation: Bridge to Reality

In a 30-year-old text on test interpretation fundamentals (many of which are ignored today), Goldman (1971) described the following three models for transforming assessment data into counseling information—for "bridging the gap" between a score and its real-world implications.

Clinical interpretations: Bridge for those with time. The labor-intensive clinical interpretation model (see Goldman, 1971, for specifics) is shaky at best—unless counselors are very well trained and have a light load. It is often supported by little more than a list of scores; a vague understanding of measurement error, "validity coefficients," and "hit rates"; specific knowledge about a few occupations and a mystical reliance on counselor/counselee intuition. While intuition can contribute to assessment for career counseling, counselors should expect publishers of assessment instruments to help them "bridge the gap" between scores and their implications.

Success predictions: Bridge to nowhere. Presumably, the prediction model can forecast levels of occupational success. Presumably, a counselor can say (for example): "Pat, based on your test scores, chances are about 59 out of 100 that you will be moderately 'successful' as a counseling psychologist and 27 out

of 100 that you will be highly 'successful.' Now, as for flight attendant and pediatrician, . . ." Unfortunately, research indicates that so-called "actuarial methods" can never provide predictions of occupational success for enough occupations and with enough precision to be of use in career exploration (e.g., see Goldman, 1994; Prediger, 1974). Nevertheless, the latest claim is that success predictions based on general mental ability (formerly called IQ) can be provided and compared across nearly all occupations. This is despite the facts that: (a) "success" is defined differently from occupation to occupation (b) defensible measures of level of success are often unavailable (e.g., for counseling psychologist, pediatrician); (c) predictor-success correlations are available for relatively few occupations; and (d) when available, prediction errors are large.

Attempts to predict occupational choice are also unwarranted. Besides, what counselor would want to say (for example): "Pat, chances are 73 out of 100 you will become a nurse, [etc.]"? According to Zytowski (1994), the prediction model "is the failed relationship" (p. 222) between tests and career counseling.

Similarity estimates: Bridge to the work world. The similarity model ("you look like a person who") can be used to survey the work world in order to identify occupational options warranting exploration. (For over 60 years, interpretations of the Strong Interest Inventory Occupational Scales have been based on this model.) The goal of the similarity model is not to predict level of success or to find the "ideal career." Rather, the goal is to say (for example): "Pat, here are some occupations that attract people who are similar to you in several important ways. You may want to check them out." Research shows that observed differences among career groups are of sufficient magnitude to provide focus to career exploration (e.g., see Prediger, 1974; Rounds & Tracey, 1990; Zytowski, 1994). Counselors should expect publishers of assessment instruments to provide them with an interpretive bridge based on similarity model research. Improvised, armchair "structured searches" should be questioned.

6. Informed Self-Estimates: Key to Ability Assessment

Unfortunately, test scores are seldom available for many work-relevant abilities—e.g., sales, leadership/management, organization, creative/artistic, social interaction. Too often, work-relevant abilities that can't be assessed by paper-and-pencil tests are ignored. But career exploration based only on abilities for which there are tests not only misses important abilities, it does not take account of the powerful role of self-concepts in occupational choice (recall Super's Dictum). Ability self-estimates bring work-relevant self-concepts to the attention of the counselee and the counselor. Elsewhere, I have discussed how *informed* self-estimates of abilities can be used to facilitate self/career exploration (Prediger, 1994). To be accurate, self-estimates must be informed by experience—including the ability estimates provided by test scores, if they are available.

7. Comprehensive, Articulated Assessment: A Goal

Career development theory makes it hard to defend career exploration based only on interests, only on abilities, or only on job values (e.g., see Lowman, 1993). Nevertheless, some counselors still take a piecemeal approach to career assessment—e.g., interests in Grade 9; abilities 3 years later. Counselors may also face the problem of interpreting interest, ability, etc. assessments based on different norms, profile formats, and work world structures. Some pub-

lishers are responding to these problems with comprehensive, articulated assessment programs. Counselors should expect nothing less.

8. Development of Possibilities into Realities: A Requirement

One of the career counselor's primary functions is to help counsees develop career possibilities into realities—that is, to facilitate personal growth (e.g., building the abilities needed for a preferred career path). In conjunction with other information about the counselee, assessment information can suggest where growth would be helpful and how it can be effected.

Summary

Trait and factor theory, (now "person-environment fit theory") has been revitalized by career development theory. Recognition of the importance of the self-concept in career exploration provides the basis for a closer relationship between assessment and counseling.

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